

The internment of Belgian soldiers after the fall of Antwerp, October 1914



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Introduction

- More than 32.000 soldiers which are interned in the Netherlands after the fall of the Fortified Position of Antwerp (FPA), on the 10th October 1914.
- A recurrent subject in Belgian politics until late in the sixties.
- Brought under attention again in 2008 and 2013.

The Fortified Position of Antwerp

- Antwerp is an economical hub, but also a military focal point.
- The “*réduit national*”:
 - A defensive stronghold
 - But also a offensive position
- Throughout the changes of the Belgian defense plans, Antwerp retains its central role in the national defense system.

The Fortified Position of Antwerp

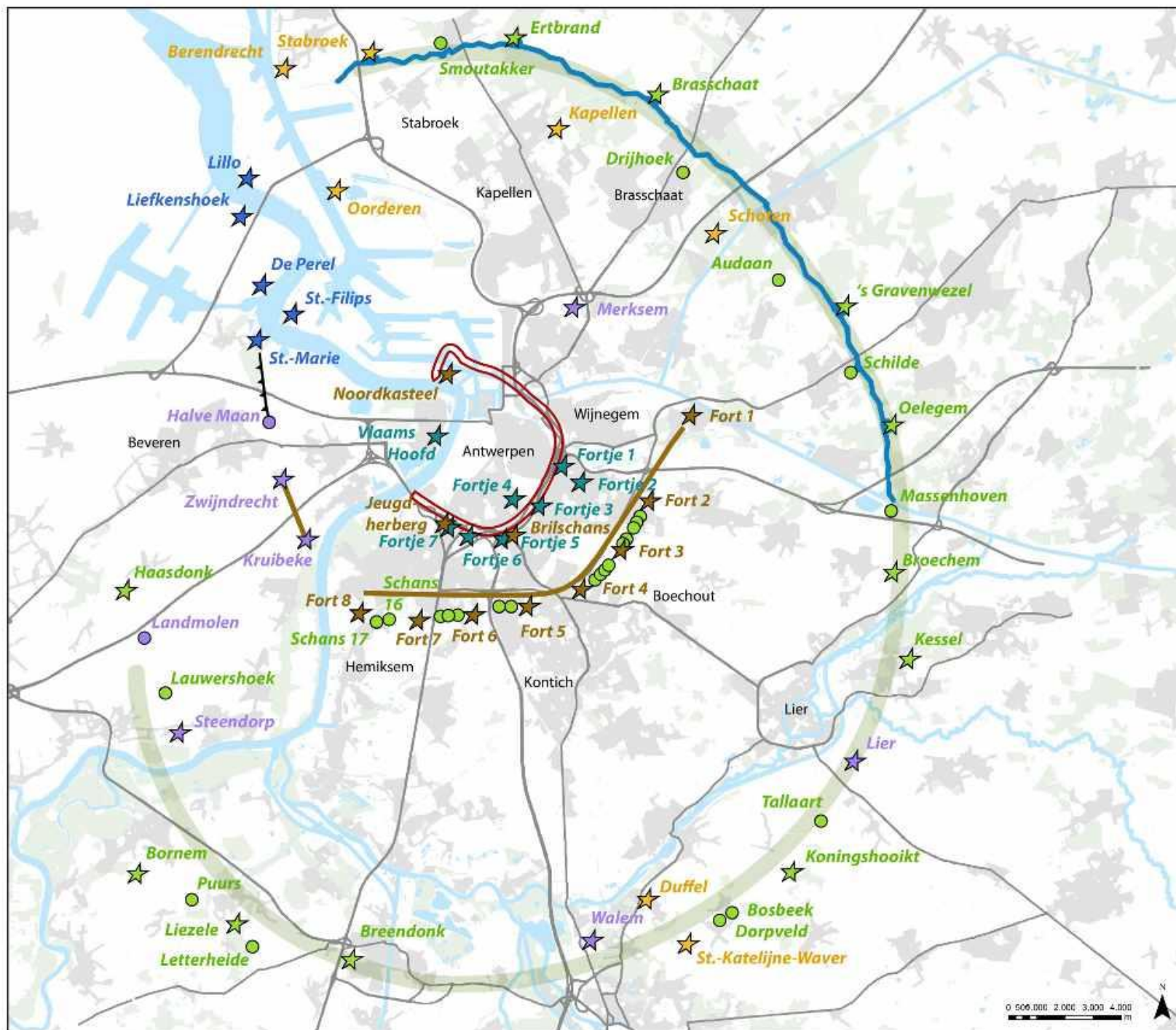
- The act of 1859 organizes a threefold defense system
 - 1. A siege wall around the city
 - 2. A circle of brick fortresses, 3 – 4 km away from the city
 - 3. A number of defensive inundations

The Fortified Position of Antwerp

- Mostly following the rapid evolution of artillery pieces, the FPA gets frequent updates.
- Due to the increase in caliber and shooting range of artillery pieces, the government decides to construct a second and wider girdle of forts to defend the city.

The Fortified Position of Antwerp

- The FPA, thus, consists in 1914 out of:
- 1. The old siege wall
- 2. The nineteenth century forts with a security wall
- 3. The outer girdle of forts and redoubts, 9 to 16 km from the city
- 4. Inundations



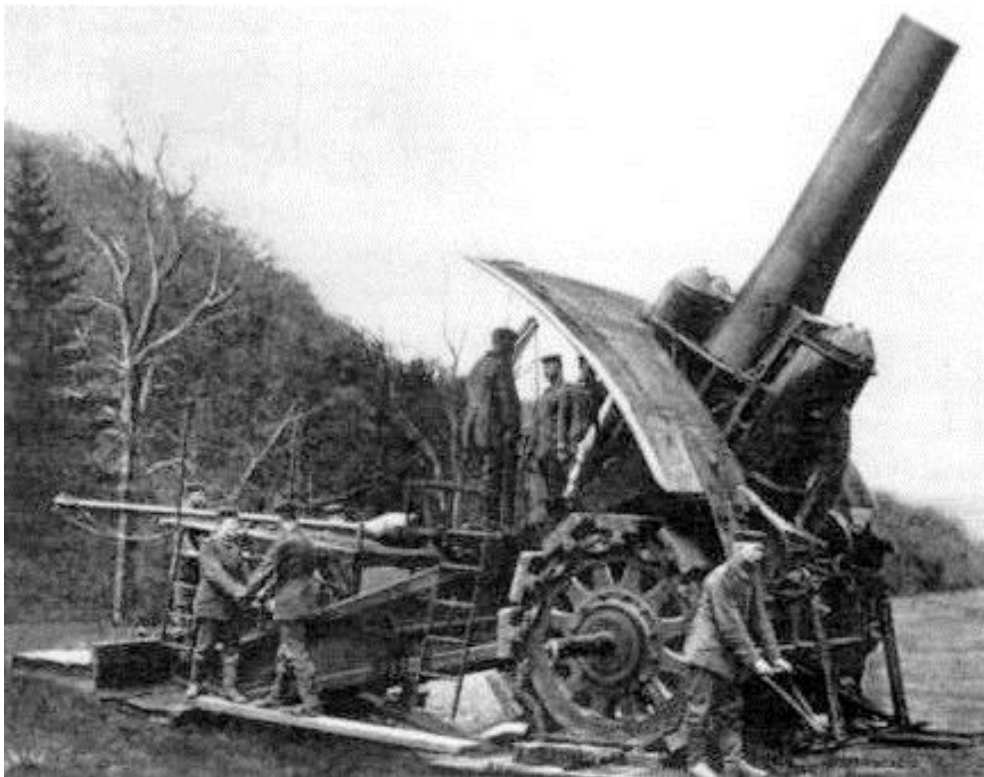
The Fortified Position of Antwerp

- The FPA is considered impregnable, but has numerous weaknesses:
 - Not completely built on the left river bank
 - The security wall is virtually non-existent in the north
 - A lot of concrete work has yet to be finished
- + a lack of artillery pieces, ammunition and adequately trained troops.
- + newest enemy artillery...

The Fortified Position of Antwerp

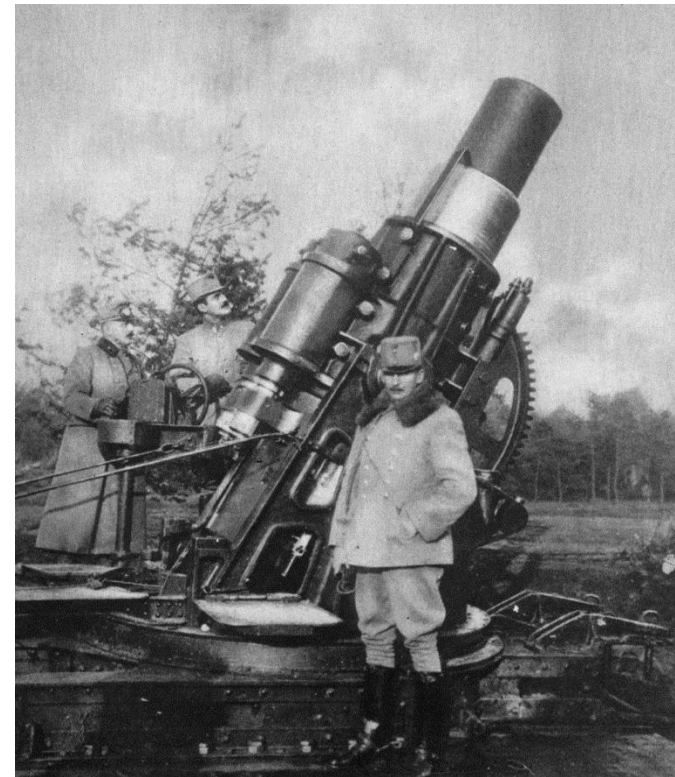
Big Bertha, 420 mm (1000 kg)

Range: 10 km.



Skoda Motor Mörser, 305 mm (380 kg)

Range: 9,6 km.





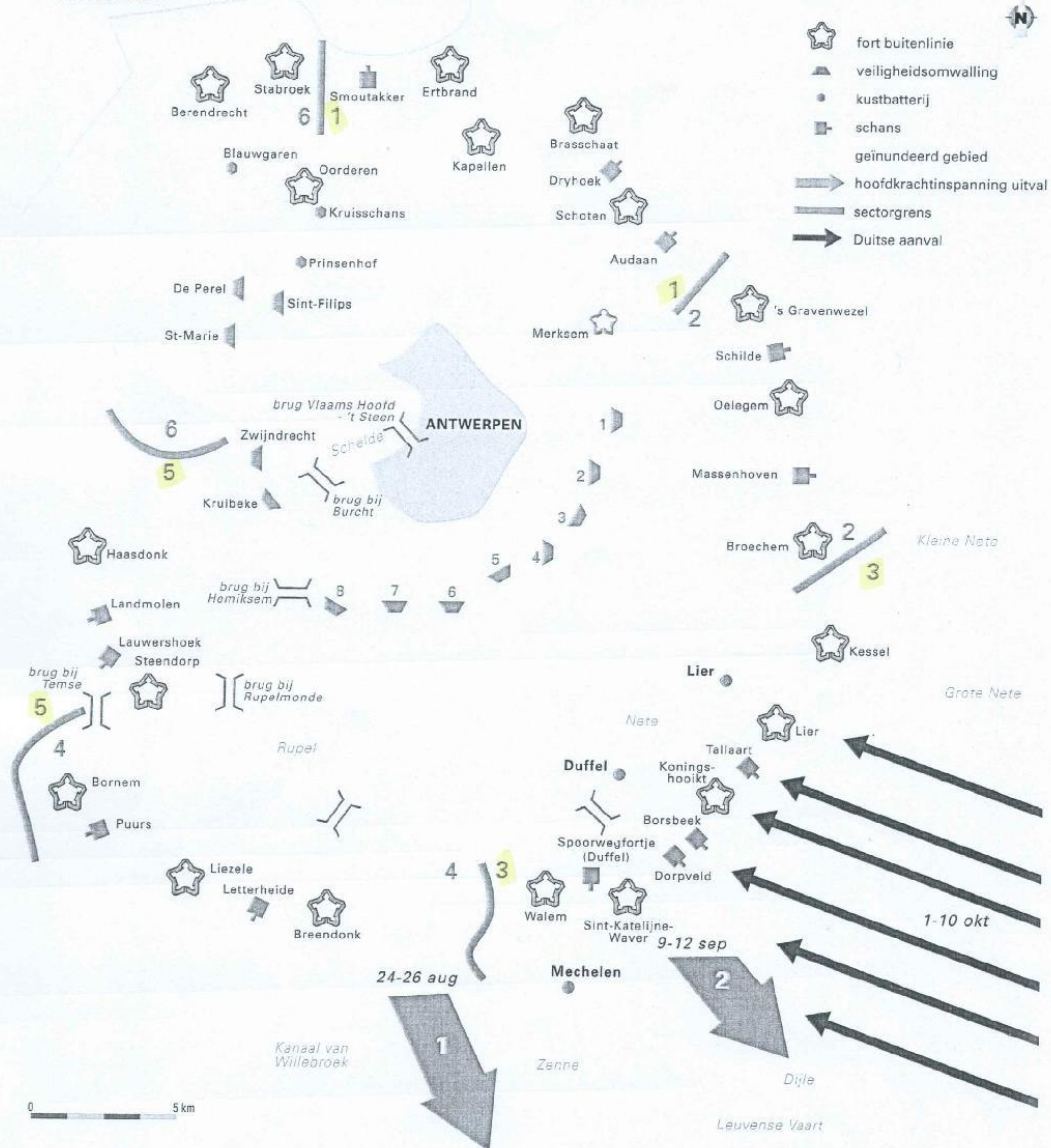
FORT LIERRE

Ein Schuß der „fleißigen Berta“

The Siege of Antwerp

- On the 27th September 1914, the German army attacks the PFA.
- A day later, the heavy pieces artillery are also put to use.
- The attacks concentrates mostly around the 3rd sector.
- By the 3rd October 1914, most forts and redoubts are either destroyed or evacuated...

DE BELGISCHE VERSTERKTE STEDEN VÓÓR DE EERSTE WERELDOORLOG - ANTWERPEN



The Siege of Antwerp

- 1st October: The German army breaches the outer girdle.
- 3rd October: The government and diplomats leave Antwerp
- 3rd-4rd October: Churchill arrives with 2000 marines
- 5th October: 7000 British marines join as support
- 5th October: The German army crosses the line of the Nete

The Siege of Antwerp

- 6th-7th October: The king and Belgian field army leave. The remaining troops of the FPA, the second army division and the English remain to defend the inner girdle of forts.
- 7th-8th October: At midnight, the Germans start to bombard the city. This is also the start of numerous reports of defections among the Belgian troops.
- 8th-9th October: The English marines leave to avoid capture and the second army division and some garrison troops follow suit.
- General Deguise moves to the left bank for a last stand. The surviving forts and redoubts have to battle as isolated positions.

The Siege of Antwerp

- 9th October: The number of defections grows continuously. Alarming (but incorrect) news of attacks on the left bank and retreating troops convince General Deguise to surrender.
- 10th October: During the night, General Werbrouck sets out to search the German army again. This time, he arrives at the Antwerp city hall, where he meets the Antwerp civil authorities and the German army leadership, which have concluded a cease-fire.
- After a discussion, Werbrouck signs this “convention”. Ultimately, General Deguise lets himself be taken prisoner of war, while the other officers are allowed to attempt to reach the field army.

The Siege of Antwerp

- The results are manifold:
 - 1. Up to 40.000 soldiers cross the Dutch border.
 - 2. A total of 33.000 soldiers and 406 officers are interned.
 - 3. Around 30.000 soldiers from the isolated forts are taken prisoner.
- = a loss of no less than a fifth of the total war-time numbers.

The Siege of Antwerp

- A special mention is reserved for the retreating British troops which get intercepted and battle with the German army.
- This leads to the death of 57 soldiers, the capture of 936 and the internment of 1600.
- The total number of interned soldiers in the Netherlands reaches: 33,064 Belgians (406 officers), 1751 British (139 officers), 1461 Germans (68 officers), 8 French (5 officers) and 4 American officers.

The military policies

- Accusations of mass desertions are manifold.
- Only the 11th March 1916, the minister of War categorizes the interned soldiers as “disappeared”.
- The interned officers are required to write reports to allow a preliminary research of their cases.

The military policies

- How is desertion in time of war described in the military penal code?
- Officers:
 - Staying away from their corps of residence for more than three days,
 - Leaving the kingdom without permission,
 - Not returning to their corps or residence within three days after their period of leave.

The military policies

- How is desertion in time of war described in the military penal code?
- Regular soldiers:
 - Leaving the corps or unit with permission for more than three days,
 - Not arriving for three days after the expected arrival time, while travelling individually,
 - Not returning for three days after the end of leave or after the expected moment of return after being called back to serve.

The military policies

- With eight aggravating circumstances for soldiers:
 - An earlier conviction of desertion
 - Desertion after deliberation with a friend
 - Keeping your weapon or horse
 - Committing desertion while forming part of a patrol, guard...
 - Desertion from a correctional squad
 - Usage of a fake or falsified letter of leave
 - ***Crossing the border of Belgian territory***
 - ***Desertion which lasts longer than six months*** (new, 24th February 1917)

The military policies

- This implies that regular soldiers cannot be convicted for desertion, if they cross the border while being part of their unit and under their commanding officer.
- I have reviewed military court cases with the charge: *“Desertion in time of war, for more than six months, from 8/9/10 October 1914 until December 1918 (or later)”*
- Invariably, it concerns people who leave their unit at a certain point.
- Usually, it concerns people who don civilian clothes before crossing.

The military policies

- Officers are liable for prosecution for crossing the border, but their cases follow a different procedure.
- A commission led by General Biebuyck is installed to review the rights to promotion of the repatriated officers
- Its research stipulates how many years of service are taken away from the officers and if they are deemed worthy of serving in the army.
- Up to five years of service can be taken away.

The military policies

- Negatively judged officers can be send to the military courts.
- Their cases end in an acquittal or in a conviction which, then, gets erased because of the law of amnesty for military crimes.
- Negative advice of the commission Biebuyck does, however, have enduring consequences for the careers of the repatriated officers.

The policies of the government

- The problem is the government-built compensation program for the veterans of the Great War.
 - Demobilization compensation (100 francs + 25 for every year of service)
 - Clothing compensation (200 francs)
 - A 13th month of soldier wages (+/- 100 francs)
 - Special compensations for officers
 - A soldier compensation (300 francs and supplementary 100 francs for every born and yet to be born child)
 - A militia compensation (5 months of wages are fully or partially paid after demobilization) and a hearth compensation for the demobilized

The policies of the government

- These measures do not discriminate against the interned soldiers.
- Moreover, for interned soldiers and pows, there is a back payment of soldier wages (soldiers: 525 francs and lower officers: 3750 francs).
- The exception is the “front-chevron”.

The policies of the government

- A royal decree of the 24th June 1916 introduces the “front-chevron”.
- The first chevron is bequeathed after 18 months of front service, the following chevrons after each subsequent 6 months.
- Each chevrons means a daily sum of 5 centimes for the holder.
- The chevrons can be taken away for:
 - A conviction by a military court
 - Notorious bad behaviour or a lack of courage

The policies of the government

- Until 1919, there a number of revisions of the “front-chevron”.
- 12 months of service for the first chevron, 8 can be earned.
- There is a broader definition of “front service”.
- It also gives detailed provisions for captured soldiers:

The entitled “front-chevron” is awarded, when falling wounded into the hands of the enemy, if it is proven that they did everything in their possibility.
- Lack of courage or a conviction for desertion lead to the permanent loss of earlier earned front chevrons.

The policies of the government

- The law of the 7th June 1919 creates the long running parliamentary discussions.
- It organizes a payment based on the number of earned chevrons.
- 100 francs for the first and 50 franc for each subsequent chevron.
- Payable from the 50th or 55th birthday of the holder.

The policies of the government

- The problem of the whole discussion is that courage and sacrifice are at the base of the delivery of the “front-chevron”.
- The research done by army officials concerning the internment of the soldiers lays bare the widespread panic which leads a growing number of soldiers to flee from their unit.
- Example: Fort Sint-Marie, the HQ of the FPA on the 9th October 1914.

The policies of the government

- Only the law of the 2nd July 1932 allots a number of interned soldiers one “front-chevron”. All other propositions did not have any results.
- This law gives a chevron to unwounded soldiers who are captured by the enemy if they were not isolated (i.e. member of at least a part of their unit).
- An also to: interned soldiers which can irrecusably prove that they crossed to border fighting the enemy and resisting to the utmost of their powers.

The policies of the government

- This law leads to 469 of the 33.000 soldiers getting a “front-chevron”.
- The proposition of 2008 and 2013 states that the English at least treated their interned and captured soldiers equally, but
 - They all crossed the border fighting enemy soldiers.
 - Their crossing was not comparable in “weight of soldiers”,
 - nor in the “weight” of the situation and its consequences as viewed by the contemporary army and government officials.